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## Literature and History

Greg Walker

Literary studies have come a long way since New Criticism held sway and nothing outside the text, whether biography, history, psychology or sociology was thought necessary to illuminate a work's meaning or qualities. And most of that journey has been worthwhile. It is now common for critics to study a literary work *in context*, and to apply to it, not only the tools of what we might think of as 'traditional' historicism - knowledge of the writer's life, career and intellectual milieu, of the text's linguistic and textual contexts and the material conditions of its production - but also an appreciation of the less tangible factors that may have left their imprint on texts. New Historical, psychoanalytic, cultural materialist, feminist and queer readings have all variously stressed the ways that texts betray traces of the deep structures of racial, gendered, sexualised or class-specific subject positions, and the influence of hegemonic cultures in the very processes of their creation. Indeed, 'historicisms' of one form or another seem so to dominate literary studies today that it is hard to imagine a time when history and politics were not hard-wired into the literary imagination, whether consciously or unconsciously. 'Always historicise' is the current rallying cry, and this has led both to some powerful re-readings of canonical texts, and to the realisation that texts and genres once dismissed by scholars as unimportant, were actually extraordinarily powerful at the time they were created.

Historicist critics have, for example, been increasingly sensitive not only to what texts say, but also to what they are conspicuously *not* saying, to those topics on which a

poem is conspicuously, perhaps suspiciously, silent. How is it, for example, that Geoffrey Chaucer could write thousands of lines of verse on social issues in his *House of Fame* or *The Canterbury Tales* and not reflect upon the series of profound political crises that shook England in the wake of the Peasant's Revolt of 1381, in which several of his friends and associates lost their lives? Does his apparent avoidance of these events (save for a brief, flippant allusion to the peasants' rising in his *Nuns' Priest's Tale*), while fellow poets John Gower and William Langland seemed obsessed with them, suggest that he was indifferent to the issues they raised? Or was he too cowed by fear or ambition to voice his views? Recent criticism has re-examined the poet's canon with such questions in mind, and discovered it to be shot through with sophisticated discussions of popular social forms, tyrannical government and religious and political self-determination. Chaucer, it seems, was an intensely political poet after all, but expressed his political concerns in unexpected ways, exploring issues prompted by the crises of national government more often through discussions of personal relationships, sexual difference or marital dysfunction than through more direct means. But to see this, we need first to be aware of the political and social environment in which he wrote. To notice a poet's apparent silence on an issue, to feel its absence in a work which seems to invite its discussion, we need to know that the issue was there in the first place, clamouring for attention at the edge of vision, and that requires a sense of historical context.

Historicist criticism has also been invaluable in revealing why certain seemingly conventional genres proved popular at particular moments in history. Panegyric, for example, the praise poetry addressed to political leaders, seems at first glance to be a trite

exercise in formulaic sycophancy, and yet it was hugely popular in the late-medieval and Renaissance periods. Why? Looking only at the verses themselves offers little clue, as they all seem remarkably similar. But re-reading them in the light of humanist political theory suggests they were one of the few effective means by which early-modern writers could advise and even criticise their rulers without risking punishment. By showing a prince a seemingly flattering representation of himself as a truly virtuous sovereign, an author implicitly reminded him of how far short of that ideal he might be, and so tacitly encouraged him to reform. Thus, as the most influential humanist scholar of the early sixteenth century, the Dutchman Desiderius Erasmus, wrote, ‘no other way of correcting a prince is as efficacious as offering the pattern of a truly good prince under the guise of flattery to them’.<sup>1</sup> Once again, by looking at texts in the light of the culture which produced them, we see them afresh, and can sense something of the power and urgency they contained for those who wrote and first read them.

The value of ‘always historicising’ differs from poem to poem, of course. Not every historical event is a useful ‘context’ for every contemporary text. An indication of how recourse to history might actually obscure a text is provided by Tom Paulin’s surely mischievous assertion that reading Keats’s ‘Ode to Autumn’ with a careful eye for contemporary events might reveal a revolutionary subtext to its opening lines.

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,  
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun,  
Conspiring with him how to load and bless

With fruit the vines that round thatch-eves run;  
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage trees,  
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core...

Although Keats himself cited viewing a field of autumnal stubble as his inspiration, Paulin suggests that what the poem is really about, when looked at historically, is not seasonal change but the 'Peterloo Massacre', the violent suppression of a working class rally in Manchester in 1819, the year in which Keats wrote the poem. In the light of Peterloo, he suggests, there is surely a 'subtle anxiety and discomfort behind' the poem's 'apparently attractive images'. Does not 'mists' hint at political subterfuge, and 'conspiring' echo 'the Manchester *Conspiracy*', as the right wing press dubbed the rally? By the time we reach the claim that: 'The *sun run* combination brings *gun* almost to mind, and those loaded apple trees make me uneasy', we might suspect a playful glint in the critic's eye, suggesting that his real point is that historicism can be taken too far: sometimes a line about fruit really is just about fruit.<sup>2</sup>

Literary criticism and history are not, of course, always natural bedfellows. Indeed they can pull in contrary directions. Social and economic historians, for example, tend to study human activity on a scale significantly broader than the individual, whereas literary criticism of most kinds focuses not on the mass or the typical example but the rare and striking individual utterance. Hence the suspicions of some historians for what they see as the subjective, atypical, 'misleading' evidence that literature has to offer, and the objections of literary critics that historians handle literary texts crudely, extracting

passages as ‘evidence’ without regard for genre, conventions or nuances of tone. More generally, of course, history tends to look outward, extrapolating from single documents to wider truths, seeing more value in an idea frequently encountered than one rarely seen, and claiming to be objective, detached from the subject of study, while literary criticism insists rather that the emphasis be placed inward, on the particularities of *this* text *here*, *now*; and on language *as* language in all its particularities of vocabulary, syntax and rhetorical tropes – and on the effects these create in and of themselves – a process in which the reader is always already implicated, part of the equation to be acknowledged and folded into an understanding of the aesthetic processes of reading.

To read a text historically is, I think, essential, but this should not mean reading it for its content alone - as a narrative in which certain cultural values or assumptions might be uncovered – often the same assumptions about race, class, gender and sexuality that one finds in other texts from most other periods. Reading historically should also involve reading a text as a sequence of words and rhythms, sounds and silences, aimed at the evocation of certain imaginative effects and emotional, phenomenological affects.

Texts can never stand wholly alone – even if we wanted them to. We need to appreciate their social, cultural and political contexts if we are to understand their evolution, and the cultural work they performed in their own time. This was never truer than during the Renaissance, a period when many of the great poets (Thomas Wyatt, Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser), were diplomats and politicians, and many of the great politicians were also writers (Henry VIII and Elizabeth I composed prose works, poems

and songs, Sir Walter Raleigh was a poet and historian). This was an age in which rhetoric: persuasive speech, was the foundation of both political life and poetic activity, and so the realms of literary production and politics often intersected and overlapped, sharing traits and conventions, discursive tropes and practices designed not simply to explain something to a reader or listener, but also to move them – to address not just the mind, but also the heart, seat of the passions.

The Spanish humanist, Juan Luis Vives argued that justice and language were the twin links that held civil society together, but of the two, language was the stronger.

Since justice, being peaceful and mild, is only felt as obligation in the conscience...language, however, does not just win minds, but above all rules the affects, whose dominion over men is uncontrollable and onerous.<sup>3</sup>

And it was this affective power of poetry to move people – especially when it was read or sung before an audience – that made it so dangerous, especially in the eyes of those who championed the dispassionate principles of reason and faith. This distrust stands behind both Plato's banishment of the poets from his ideal republic and Augustine and the Church Fathers' condemnations of literary and theatrical representation. And this conflict between ascetic and aesthetic principles echoes down through the thought – and the poetry – of the following centuries. Only with the rise of Christian humanism in the later fifteenth century was there a turn from scholastic insistence on reasoned dialectic argument back to an interest in rhetorical *persuasion*. Behind Cicero's declaration, much

loved of the humanists, that the ideal orator should demonstrate, delight and *move* his hearers was the acceptance that rhetoric – and thus poetry – could be allied to reason and used beneficially to prompt action in the world. The humanist ideal was thus the ‘good man skilled in speech’ – the moral thinker who could use the tools of rhetoric and poetry to inspire his fellow citizens. This was the model that his contemporaries celebrated in Sir Philip Sidney, and which the Earl of Surrey represented in his elegy on Sir Thomas Wyatt (‘Wyatt resteth here that quick [i.e. living] could never rest’); which describes each part of Wyatt’s corpse as a testament to aspects of his virtue, anatomising a stoic hero who combined poetic excellence, moral rectitude and personal integrity.

The ideal form of historical reading then, would combine both history and literary criticism in a way that Cicero or Surrey would probably have understood. It would read a literary text not only for content – for its rational, demonstrative elements, but also for its form, for its affective, emotive elements. If we consider a practical example of how literary criticism and historical analysis might be brought fruitfully together, what sorts of historical knowledge might we need to read a poem such as the following short lyric?

Lux, my fair falcon, and your fellows all,  
How well pleasant it were your liberty,                      *would be*  
Ye not forsake me that fair might ye befall.<sup>4</sup>  
But they that sometime liked my company  
5    Like lice away from dead bodies they crawl:  
Lo, what proof in light adversity!



But ye, my birds, I swear by all your bells,  
Ye be my friends, and so be but few else.

We need textual scholarship to tell us that this is a poem ascribed to Thomas Wyatt in Tottel's *Miscellany*, where the editor gave it the title 'Of such that had forsaken him'. We need linguistic knowledge to reveal that 'Lux' plays on both 'light' and 'luck', and was a common name for a falcon, and that 'light', when it is punningly picked up again in line six, means 'trivial'. Some familiarity with cultural history would remind us that falcons were a common aristocratic accessory in this period, and often stood symbolically for aristocrats themselves (in literary representations such as Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls* or Sir David Lyndsay's *Testament of the Papyngo*) – as they were thought to embody naturally the virtues: courage, loyalty, truth and stoic disregard of adversity, that were part of the idealised repertoire of the nobleman.

More prosaically, we might draw on social history to suggest that lice were a common infestation, even for courtiers, and on political history to suggest that the poem probably arises from the anxious, fiercely competitive system of courtly patronage, in which every aspirant courtier sought the favour of those above them in the social hierarchy, aiming ultimately for the employment and rewards that came from a place in the intimate circles around the king and his noble advisors. The 'they' who once liked the speaker's company but have now deserted him were thus plausibly lesser courtiers and 'hangers on' who used him as a means of improving their own fortune while he was in favour, but have abandoned him now that he seems no longer to be influential.

A knowledge of Wyatt's other poems would reveal that he wrote elsewhere on similar themes (in 'They flee from me that sometime did me seek', for example, where the desertion of former friends and lovers is, as we shall see, again lamented). More specific knowledge of Wyatt's biography might suggest that he could have written the poem on one of those occasions when he was in prison, as when he was sent to the Tower of London in 1536 on suspicion of adultery with Henry VIII's second queen, Anne Boleyn. Thus the situation that the poem imagines, with the speaker abandoned and desperate, might well have been a real one – and one with potentially mortal consequences.

This would be to read the poem for content – for its meaning as a narrative related to the poet's own life. If we approach the poem instead as a linguistic field, a series of rhythmic sounds and silences creating phenomenological effects, what else might we learn? We might note the powerful alliteration in the opening line, how the liquid 'l' and labial 'f' sounds in 'Lux, my fair falcon, and your fellows all' are brought up sharp by the plosive 'p's and 'b's in line two, and how the same movement returns in more concentrated form in line five as the ease with which former friends drift away is hinted at in 'like lice from' and the stark implications of their desertion embodied in the dead stop represented by the double buffer of 'dead bodies'. We might note how the rhyme-scheme of the first six lines charts parallel descending movements in the lexicon, first physically in 'all' befall' and 'crawl' and then socio-politically in 'liberty', 'company', 'adversity', leaving the speaker, metaphorically at least, abject, alone and on his knees.

We could also notice how the word ‘all’ is a frequent refrain in the poem: suggesting the extremity of the poet’s predicament. It is there in line 1 as an indication of the universal integrity of Lux and his kind, and returns in line seven, again associated with the birds, in contradistinction to the ‘few’ (by implication none) who can be relied upon from the human world. It is there covertly too in ‘*befall*’ and ‘*crawl*’, and gestured towards in the half rhymes of ‘bells’ and ‘else’, suggesting, if only to the reader’s subconscious, that life at court is indeed a zero-sum game, a matter of ‘all’ or nothing, in which the consequences for the losers are devastating.

Rhythmically, the prevalence of end-stopped lines gives the lyric a straightforward, affirmative quality, save for the single, overt enjambment at line 4-5, where the falcons’ reliability is contrasted with the elusive, sliding away of the unfaithful companions – a move enacted linguistically by the sliding over of one line to the next – the sibilant, liquid lightness of ‘sometime liked’ slipping easily into the bitter pay-off of ‘like lice away’. Structurally the first three lines affirming the raptors’ noble nature is a natural sense unit. The falcons’ instinctive capacity to act against their material self-interest by staying with the poet is then contrasted with the fickleness of the former companions (who, unlike Lux, remain unnamed) – and whose desertion, because no reason is given for it beyond ‘light adversity’ – seems merely capricious and contemptible.

Thus far the lyric seems straightforwardly to exemplify the popular proverb, ‘a friend in need is a friend indeed’. And yet, there is an affective subtext here that suggests

a richness to the text not evident on the surface, a subtext that runs counter to the drift of the speaker's angry assertions. While the poem praises the natural, unforced loyalty of the noble birds, and by implication, demonstrates the speaker's own stoic affinity with their virtues, there is, in his choice of allusions, a suggestion of another, less heroic reading of events, not least in the apparently very un-stoic petulance of the last line. By choosing to swear by the falcons' bells, and by *all* of them – thereby implying just how many there are – the speaker, perhaps unwittingly, draws into the poem's discursive field a striking image of the birds' captive status. These falcons are not really choosing to stay with the poet through noble, self-denying loyalty. Belled, and presumably hooded and secured to their perches with leather jesses, they could not claim their liberty if they wanted to, even if their training from birth had not already accustomed them to a life of captivity. Indeed, the very bells lauded by the poet are designed to betray their whereabouts and prevent them hunting for themselves in the wild. Wyatt had applied a very similar image to himself in the satire 'Mine Own John Poins', where he describes the way that the pleasant freedom he enjoys on his estates in Kent is sullied by the fact that he knows that he is actually confined there, banished into internal exile by the king: a confinement symbolised by a metaphorical 'clog' – a block used to restrict the movements of animals – tied to his heel.

In lusty leas at liberty I walk...

*pleasant fields*

Save that a clog doth hang yet at my heel.

The sense of captivity felt so keenly by the speaker of this poem is conspicuously absent on the surface of 'Lux my Fair Falcon', albeit it returns unbidden to its subtext in the mention of those bells, themselves as much a talisman of captivity as the clog that so disturbs the 'Wyatt' of 'Mine Own John Pains'.

Similarly the image of crawling vermin, portraying the loathsome betrayal of his companions, also carries with it a subtext suggestive of the complexity of the political situation the poem describes. The comparison speaks both to the mortally high stakes for which Tudor politics was played at court, and also to the plausible motivation of the companions. The poem is an affective construction, it bespeaks and evokes emotions as well as conveys information, so where the speaker asserts the fickle, verminous treachery of his former companions, seeking to focus readerly contempt upon their behaviour, the text simultaneously speaks of his own bitterness and vulnerability, and hints at the desperate nature of his situation. If the former companions are like lice, then the speaker himself is like a dead body – an image that gains in resonance if the poem really was written from prison.

In his other great lyric of frustration with courtly life, 'They Flee from me', Wyatt again reached for natural comparisons to describe his speaker's sense of abandonment by ungrateful former suitors. The first stanza presents a queasily ambivalent conflation of human and animal images, in which at one moment the treacherous suitors seem to be human lovers, creeping, whether predatorily or fearfully, towards his bed on 'naked foot', and the next they seem to be timid birds or small animals, lured to him by offers of bread.

They flee from me that sometime did me seek  
With naked foot stalking in my chamber.  
I have seen them gentle, tame and meek  
That now are wild and do not remember  
That sometime they put themselves in danger  
To take bread at my hand; and now they range  
Busily seeking with a continual change. (1-7)

The focus sharpens in the second stanza, when the speaker dwells on one ‘special’ moment, when a woman let her loose gown fall from her shoulders, and, kissing him, ‘softly said, “Dear, how like you this?”’(14). But, as the third stanza reveals, the power relation between the two has since reversed. Now she is seemingly in the ascendancy at court, and he has been casually dismissed from her company, leaving him to ask angrily, ‘since that I am so kindly served / I would fain know what she hath deserved.’ (20-21).

Again, here is a poem that invites our sympathetic identification with a speaker who has been betrayed by an ungrateful suitor. But the scenario described to prompt that sympathy again offers both too little and too much information to make identification with him unproblematic. The first stanza’s conflation of the stalking lovers with timid wild creatures implies that the speaker was not simply the victim of others’ guile but himself a player in the game of courtly seduction. While he had the upper hand, it was they who had to ‘put themselves in danger’ to approach him, drawn by the lure which, by

his own admission, he held out to tempt them in. And the insistent plurals of the first nine lines themselves undermine the speaker's claim to outraged innocence. If the woman of stanzas two and three was 'special', she was hardly unique; and her desertion of the speaker once she has got from him what she desires, was hardly unprecedented. He had lured others before her, and seemingly more since: the anonymous 'they' who once stalked his chamber but now roam elsewhere are part of a fluid, self-interested courtly sexual economy in which the speaker has played his own willing role. So there is an implicit irony to his final, indignant question, suggestive of the kind of self-exposing comments to be found in Robert Browning's dramatic monologues written three centuries later. When the speaker says 'since that I so kindly am served', he intends the irony of 'kindly' – meaning both 'generously' and also 'appropriately to one's nature or "kind"' – to cut only the treacherous 'she' who has offended him. He claims that he has been nothing but generous to her, and thus deserves to be treated accordingly; but she, being naturally cruel, has behaved according to her 'kind'. However, thinking back to those opening lines, what might such a promiscuous player of the game of courtly conquest really expect and deserve? Might it not be that the man who lured so many women to his chamber, in being rejected by a more successful female courtier, has got exactly what he deserves after all?

Poems like these suggest the value of combining literary and historical approaches to enrich an understanding of the scenarios represented. But to think merely in terms of texts and contexts is probably too limited a model of what such readings offer. Historical criticism adds richness to our understanding of the contexts *of* a poem – but

those contexts in turn create new meanings *in* the poem. Literary close reading in turn suggests the sub-texts which further enrich the context, both suggesting how a poem might *move* its readers as well as inform them – and also revealing the poet’s own investment in that text – the degrees of powerful and potentially conflicted emotional investment born of his or her own attitudes and anxieties – what was at stake there for him/her. In that sense the poetry enriches our knowledge of history every bit as much as the other way around.

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<sup>1</sup> R.A.B. Mynors and D.F.S. Thomson, eds, *The Correspondence of Erasmus* (2 vols, Toronto, 1975), II, 81.

<sup>2</sup> Tom Paulin, *The Secret Life of Poems: A Poetry Primer* (London, Faber and Faber, 2008), pp. 80-81.

<sup>3</sup> *De ratione dicendi* (1532),

<sup>4</sup> ‘(Yet) you do not forsake me to seek better fortune.’